

'I'm Feeling Very Railroaded': Elkridge Residents Resist Proposal for Train Facility

Residents of greater Elkridge looked to officials for answers about a freight operation that could be coming down the tracks to Hanover Road.

By [Elizabeth Janney](#) | [Email the author](#) | March 28, 2011

Concerned that a major industrial freight facility may be built nearby, Elkridge residents pressed state transportation officials for answers about what the operation would mean for safety, infrastructure, and the potential site of an elementary school on Coca Cola Drive.

The state announced Thursday that it was considering four locations in central Maryland for a facility where cargo could be transferred between trains and trucks. Concern about one of the sites—on Hanover Road at Race Road—prompted more than 100 people to turn out the same day for a [meeting](#) of the Greater Elkridge Community Association (GECA), where transportation officials were on hand to answer questions.

“The sense I’m getting, obviously, is very negative,” said GECA President Howard Johnson at the end of the meeting.

Funded by a federal grant and slated to open by 2015, the "intermodal facility" would enable freight trains on the CSX rails to carry double-stacked shipping containers interchangeable between trains and trucks via electric cranes. A site for the facility could be in either Howard, Anne Arundel or Prince George’s County.

Leif Dormsjo, Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) chief of staff, said the Hanover Road site had a “different complexion” than the other three because of the possibility of a school being built on Coca Cola Drive.

“I’m really concerned about the school,” said Nancy Pfeffer, president of the PTA at [Elkridge Elementary School](#), which is over capacity. “I had a conversation with the principal about double-stacking desks because we don’t have enough space.”

While the need for a new elementary school is evident, the state is aware that consensus on a location is not.

"You might think [Coca Cola Drive] is not the right place to have a school," said Dormsjo.

GECA has testified before the Howard County Board of Education multiple times asking for alternate school sites, but the board voted to accept the Coca Cola Drive property in October 2010 and has not presented other options to the public since.

"We've launched an effort to identify alternative school sites," said Dormsjo, "not just for an elementary school but also a high school and a middle school. What you want is additional schools, so that's on our to-do list." The state, he told Patch, has extensive resources for mapping and "identifying opportunities."

But residents were concerned about more than the school site.

How would surrounding areas be affected?

"I don't know if you've seen the studies but I think we're fourth or fifth trying to get around," said one resident, referencing congestion faced by [Baltimore-Washington commuters](#). He expressed uneasiness about the 24/7 flow of trucks near the facility.

State officials maintained that traffic would only increase by 5 percent based on preliminary figures.

Residents along Hanover Road also said they feared they would be forced to move. One said CSX had already purchased her friend's business.

"We've given properties options," responded Dormsjo. "We have not purchased any properties at this point."

Others worried about the environmental impact of the facility, given nearby parkland and the proposed Hanover Road site's location on a floodplain.

Dormsjo said all of these things would be evaluated under the National Environmental Policy Act, which mandates a 12-month period of assessments by the state.

What's coming down the line?

Many residents wanted to know what kind of freight would be going through such a facility.

“There is some material in the containers that you would buy at Home Depot or Lowe’s, like a battery,” said Chris Durden, director of terminal development for CSX.

He emphasized that all cargo was “consumer-based” and that the facility would allow twice the amount of goods to be transported at half the cost; since trains could be “double-stacked,” he said savings would be passed down to consumers.

But because of its capacity to handle large volumes of goods, one GECA member pointed out that rail transit could be an easy target for terrorists. He asked officials what security measures, if any, were in place.

“We get the highest ratings of port security in the country,” replied Dormsjo, who said that all cargo goes through radiation screening.

Next stop: more discussion

At the end of the three-hour discussion, greater Elkridge residents made it clear they were not convinced they would be better off having the facility in their neighborhood.

“I’m feeling very railroaded right now,” said GECA Director Valerie McGuire. “I’m not only a Howard County citizen, I’m a Maryland resident and I’m a U.S. taxpayer ... and I already feel like I am out of this process, because none of us heard about [other initially proposed] sites and why you discounted them.”

County officials weren't sold either. “We’re looking for more information; we’re just hearing about this,” said Councilwoman Courtney Watson. “Frankly, I don’t like what I hear but I’m going to be well informed before I make a decision ... I can promise you this: You will not go through this by yourselves. We’re going to be there for you and we’re going to hold the state accountable.”

GECA has formed a committee to discuss the project and is seeking community involvement.

MDOT’s real estate division will be surveying the area to locate opportunities for school sites, said Chris Patusky, MDOT's director of real estate.

In addition, MDOT has created a [website](#) about the project and has agreed to disclose reports from the site selection process to GECA.

“It is vital that the community is engaged, that we are transparent about what we’re doing and that we be accountable,” said Dormsjo. “We’re at the very beginning of a public process here. We’ve got a lot to evaluate in terms of how we can make this facility work in one of these four locations” over the next year.

There will be a public workshop for residents to discuss the project with officials on Wednesday, April 27, from 7-9 p.m. at [Elkridge Landing Middle School](#).

The other sites are off Montevideo Road, near MD-175 at Brock Bridge Road, and in Beltsville. All four were selected because they met the following criteria, established by MDOT and CSX in conjunction with the Federal Railroad Administration:

- Included 70-plus usable acres of property
- Were along the main line of CSX railways
- Had access to highways
- Could be configured to accommodate 4,000-foot trains at 15–20 mph
- Situated south of Howard Street tunnel

According to officials, each of the four sites has the same chance of being selected as the location for the intermodal facility. The reason the state approached GECA first was because "the school site started the dialogue," said Dormsjo. "There's an urgency about that."